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PERSPECTIVE AND THE PROPOSITIONAL- ATTITUDE VIEW OF EXPERIENTIAL IMAGINATION

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against the scene-view of experiential imagination, in favor of what has recently been called *the propositional-attitude view* (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar, forthcoming; Liefke, 2022). It identifies a variety of new support for this view.

A post by Kristina Liefke

Imagine swimming in the ocean on a cold autumn day: the sea is rough, the waves are splashing in your face, your mouth is filled with the taste of salt water (the example is due to Vendler, 1979). Much work in the philosophy of language and mind has identified the objects of such imaginative episodes with events or scenes (see, e.g., Camp, 2017; Dokic and Arcangeli, 2015; Walton, 1990). The latter are spatio-temporally extended situations that are experienced from some particular – possibly unoccupied – perspective (see D'Ambrosio and Stoljar, forthcoming). My post argues

The identification of the objects of experiential imagination (OEs) with scenes is supported by the observation that OEs are often introduced by event-denoting expressions (e.g. (1a/b); see Grimm and McNally, 2015; Higginbotham, 2003) and that OEs typically contain more information (see (1c)) than is expressed by the embedded clause (in (1a): [*Zeno is*] *swimming in the ocean*; see Liefke, 2022; Stephenson, 2010).

- (1) a. Zeno imagines swimming in the ocean.
 ≡ b. Zeno imagines *some event / scene in which he is* swimming in the ocean.
 ≡ c. Zeno imagines swimming in the rough ocean, the waves splashing in his face, and his mouth filling with salt water.

The 'scenic' nature of OEs is further supported by the fact that reports of experiential imagining can make explicit reference to perspective (e.g. through the locative modifier *from up on a cliff* in (2); see Vendler, 1979), where perspective is commonly associated with events or situations, rather than with propositions (see e.g. Barwise, 1981).

- (2) Zeno imagines a man swimming *from the (visual) perspective of a fellow swimmer / from the (emotional) point of view of an aquaphobic / from up on a cliff*.

In the last 5 to 10 years, work in semantics and the philosophy of language has challenged the scene-view of OEs. On a general level, this work contends that only propositional objects (i.e. sets of possible worlds, or of situations) enable the familiar Russellian account of intensionality and the common Boolean logic for entailments (see Sinhababu, 2015; cf. Montague, 2007). More specifically, this work has argued that "[imagined] scenes have propositional representations" (Liefke, 2022, p.15) such that "to imagine from a particular perspective is to [...] [imagine] a particular propositional content" (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar, forthcoming, p.11). My post provides further support for the propositional-attitude view of experiential imagination. This

includes the possibility of allowing for *kinds* of scenes (with non-specific objects), of distinguishing between first-person perspectival- and *de se*-imagination, and of accounting for multi-modal imagining.

Support for the Propositional-Attitude View

To provide propositional objects for experiential imagination, I have recently proposed to represent imagined scenes by the intersection of all propositions that are true in these scenes (Liefke, 2022; cf. Grzankowski, 2015). To see how this works, consider the scene depicted in Figure 1.^[1]



Figure 1: A first-person perspective swimming scene.

(3) lists the propositions that are true of this scene: (To keep my example as simple as possible, I assume that the propositions in (3) exhaustively describe this scene.)

(3)

- 'there is a large body of bubbly teal-blue water'

- 'a man's right arm is stretched forward'
- 'there are goosebumps on the crook of the arm's elbow'
- 'the wrist of the arm is wearing two bracelets'

Using (3), we can represent the scene from Figure 1 by the complex proposition in (4):

(4) 'in a large body of bubbly teal-blue water, a man's right arm with goosebumps on the crook of the elbow and two bracelets on the wrist is stretched forward'

The informational equivalence of the scene in Figure 1 and the proposition in (4) suggests that, in imaginative episodes in which the expression *a man swimming in the ocean* refers to the scene in Figure 1, this expression allows for the truth-preserving substitution by a *that*-clause denoting (4). This is indeed the case, as is shown by the intuitive equivalence of (5a) and (5b):

- (5) a. Zeno imagines (a scene, viz. Fig. 1, in which) a man (is) swimming.
- ≡ b. Zeno imagines that, in a large body of bubbly teal-blue water, a man's right arm – with goosebumps on the crook of the elbow and two bracelets on the wrist – is stretched forward.

The propositional representation of the scene in Figure 1 already has a key advantage over the scene-view, viz. it allows for *kinds* of scenes. The latter are scenes that may not be a specific spatio-temporal part of a particular world and that may contain non-specific objects (here: some man or other, as opposed to, e.g., Zeno; see Zimmermann, 2006). This contrasts with standard versions of the scene view, which require that scenes be concrete spatio-temporal world parts (and can, hence, only contain specific objects / individuals).

A closer inspection of the 'ingredient' propositions in (4) suggests that these all describe objects (e.g., a body of water, an arm, two bracelets) and their visually perceivable properties

(e.g., shape [goosebumps], color [teal-blue], . . .). The visual perceivability of these objects and their particular perspectival shape (e.g. the small size of the man's hand relative to the size of his upper arm) suggests that (5a) is more suitably paraphrased by (6a) or (7):

(6) a. Zeno imagines a *visual* scene in which a man is swimming (in a large body of water).

[\equiv b. Zeno imagines *what* a man swimming *looks like* (to that man).] (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar, 2021)

(7) Zeno imagines a man swimming *from the man's own visual perspective*.

Unsurprisingly, different imagination contents solicit paraphrases that involve different modes of experience. Thus, the report in (8) requires a paraphrase as (9a), rather than as (6a).

(8) Zeno imagines that cold waves are splashing in a man's face, that his mouth is filled with the taste of salt water, and that the current is tugging on his legs.

(9) a. Zeno imagines a *kinesthetic / proprioceptive* scene in which a man is swimming.

[\equiv b. Zeno imagines *what* a man swimming *feels like* (to that man).]

The difference between the mode of experience in (5b) and (8) accounts for one (!) dimension of Vendler's (1979) distinction between *subjective* ['inside'] and *objective* ['outside'] imagining. However, this distinction also relies on whether the imagination content is self-ascribed (s.t. the reported imagining is *de se*; see Anand, 2011; Walton, 1990; *pace* D'Ambrosio and Stoljar, 2021). The generalization from propositions to centered propositions [functions from *de se*-centers to propositions] as the objects of experiential imagining allows for such self-ascription. In the *de se*-version of (8) (in (10)), the self (to which the content is ascribed) is denoted by 'PRO' (following Chierchia, 1989). For better readability, I use 'he/his/him' instead of 'PRO' in (11),

and take these pronouns to be read *de se*.

(10) Zeno imagines that cold waves are splashing in PRO's face, that PRO's mouth is filled with the taste of salt water, and that the current is tugging on PRO's legs.

≡ (11) a. Zeno imagines a particular kind of kinesthetic scene in which *he (himself)* is swimming.

[≡ b. Zeno imagines what *his* swimming feels like *to him*.] (D'Ambrosio and Stoljar, 2021)

More Support: multimodality & perspective-switching

Research in philosophy and psychology has observed that agents have multimodal mental imagery (see, e.g., McCarroll and Sutton, 2016; Nanay, 2018; Nigro and Neisser, 1983) and that, attendantly, OEIs can also be multimodal. An example of such OEI can be obtained by 'merging' the scene-descriptions from (5a) [visual] and (8) [kinesthetic-gustatory] (see (12)).

The propositional-attitude view straightforwardly captures this multimodality. This is possible since the view does not place modal restrictions on the 'ingredient' propositions of the scene-representation (e.g. the propositions in (3)): while some of these propositions may involve visually perceivable properties, others may(!)[2] involve different (e.g. kinesthetic, gustatory, or other) properties (see (12b)):

(12) Zeno imagines a particular kind of multimodal [*visual-gustatory-kinesthetic*] scene in which he himself is swimming.

a. Zeno imagines that, in a large body of bubbly teal-blue water, a man's right arm [. . .] is stretched forward [*visual*], the cold waves are splashing in his face [*kinesthetic*], and his mouth is filled with the taste of salt water [*gustatory*].

≡ b. Zeno imagines what a man's swimming in the ocean *feels* like, what his arm stroke *looks* like (from that man's visual perspective), and what the salt water *tastes* like (to that man).

Interestingly, OEIs have even been found to combine – or switch between – self-locating and non-self-locating elements (see, e.g., McCarroll, 2018; Rice and Rubin, 2009). Such OEIs are obtained by merging the scene-descriptions from (10) and (13) (in (14)). The report in (13) is based on Figure 2.^[3]



Figure 2: A third-person perspective swimming scene.

To emphasize that Zeno does not serve as the center of *de se*-ascription, I use the name 'Zeno' (rather than the pronoun 'he') in (13) and (14).

(13) Zeno imagines that Zeno is swimming in a large body of teal-blue water and that Zeno has brown short hair and a tanned back.

(14) Zeno imagines that Zeno is swimming in a large body of teal-blue water, that Zeno has brown short hair and a tanned back, *that cold waves are splashing in PRO's face, that PRO's mouth is filled with the taste of salt water, and that the current is tugging on PRO's legs.*

The possibility of combining^[4] (italicized) *de se*- and non-*de se* contents in the propositional representation of an imagined scene suggests that the propositional-attitude view of experiential imagination can even *combine* 'inside' and 'outside' imagining. Future work will need to provide a detailed formal account of this view and investigate how this view integrates with theories of multimodal content and pictorial representation.

Notes

[1] Image source: Cristian Palmer. September 20, 2022. <https://unsplash.com/photos/RaOKzBtN8fl>.

[2] This does not imply that, on the propositional-attitude view, all OEIs are multimodal. Instead,

what is required to experientially imagine is to stand in a relation to propositions that involve *at least one* modality. These propositions include the semantic complements in (12a) as well as in (5b) and (10). I owe this comment to Justin D'Ambrosio.

[3] Image source: Pexels. September 20, 2022. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-swimming-on-body-of-water-doing-freestyle-strokes-87831/>.

[4] To make this combination possible, non-self-ascribed contents may need to be represented as 'boring' centered propositions, along the lines suggested in (Egan, 2006).

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Piotr Kozak 8 minutes ago · 0 Likes

Clarify me if I'm wrong, but are saying that the picture 1 and 2 can be seen as a set of propositions describing their content? If it's so, then I have two problems with understanding this thesis. (1) I'm not sure whether we can determine the correctness conditions of translating one picture into such a set. For example, the first picture can be described as made up from proposition 'a man's right arm is stretched forward' as well as 'a large skinlike color stain is in the middle of the picture'. I'm not sure what can make one to favor one description over another. (2) I can't figure out what the role of

pictorial content can be. What I mean is that if pictures are going to be reduced to descriptions, then, from the perspective of human cognitive machinery, they would be epiphenomenal - they can work as heuristic tools for enhancing knowledge, but that's all. All the cognitive job is done by the set of propositions. I think that Frege and Fodor would be happy with such a consequence. That, however, would go against commonsensical view that some people, like architects, use pictures as a medium of thinking. It would require that we hold that such people are simply misguided by the phenomenology of their mental states. I'm not saying that it cannot be the case. However, it would require much more effort to show that they are somehow wrong. Anyway, regardless my doubts, it's a very interesting and clearly written post. Thank you.

Piotr Kozak

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